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SUBJECT: CHAVEZ LASHES OUT AT CARDINAL FOR CRITICIZING
REELECTION PLANS

REF: CARACAS 1739

Classified By: A/POLITICAL COUNSELOR DANIEL LAWTON,
REASONS 1.4 (D)

11. (C) Summary: President Hugo Chavez reacted harshly to Venezuelan Cardinal Jorge Urosa's December 25 criticism of a proposed constitutional amendment that would eliminate presidential term limits. Phoning in to a state media talk show on December 26, Chavez called Cardinal Urosa "immoral" and suggested "he cares nothing about ethics or his priesthood." Chavez followed up in December 27 remarks, calling on the Cardinal to leave his position and join the opposition, while accusing the Church leader of manipulating the public with lies. With the February 15, 2009, target date for a referendum rapidly approaching, state pressure on independent political actors including Catholic Church leaders, is likely to increase in the weeks ahead. End Summary.

12. (SBU) During a Christmas day visit to deliver presents to hospitalized children, Caracas Archbishop Jorge Urosa, Venezuela's only cardinal, criticized President Chavez's efforts to seek public approval of a constitutional amendment that would eliminate presidential term limits. Urosa reportedly told the local media covering the visit that unlimited re-election (of the president) has never been successful in Venezuela. He also called into question the legality of the proposed referendum (Ref A), noting that voters defeated a similar proposal included in Chavez's constitutional reform package that was defeated in a December 2007 referendum. Urosa also reportedly said that "the indefinite re-election of the President was not in line with the will of the Venezuelan people."

13. (SBU) President Chavez responded quickly by publicly criticizing the Venezuelan cardinal. Calling December 26 into a talk show on a state television network, Chavez accused Cardinal Urosa of abusing his position as leader of the Church and behaving like activists of the opposition. At a December 27 appearance at a public hospital Chavez said the Cardinal belonged to "the oligarchy" and suggested the Church's leader was manipulating the masses to oppose the elimination of presidential term limits. Chavez said, "If Christ should appear here in the flesh and blood he would whip Urosa, he would throw him out of the church. There is no violation of the Constitution and he (Urosa) knows it."

14. (C) Comment: Venezuela's Conference of Catholic Bishops contributed to the defeat of President Chavez's constitutional reform package in December 2007. Although most Venezuelans are only nominally Catholic and do not attend church regularly, the Catholic Church continues to enjoy high credibility ratings, according to local polls, and

maintains a nationwide presence, including in Chavista neighborhoods. Chavez's disproportionate response to Urosa's criticism appears to reflect a real determination to once again try to discredit Church leaders in the eyes of his supporters. Chavez continues to make polarization and scapegoating key elements of his political strategy. Consequently, pressure on civil society, including independent Church leaders and human rights activists, is likely to increase in the weeks ahead. End Comment.
CAULFIELD